

**I WAS THOUGHT TO BE WHAT I AM NOT:  
DOCETIC JESUS AND THE JOHANNINE TRADITION**

*by Gregory J. Riley*

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# ***I Was Thought to Be What I Am Not:* Docetic Jesus and the Johannine Tradition**

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## **Introduction**

Clement of Alexandria, in a fragment preserved from the beginning of the third century, tells us: "It is reported in the traditions that John, when he touched [Jesus'] outward body, put his hand deeply in, and that the solidarity of the flesh did not resist him, but made room for the hand of the disciple (Stählin, ed., *Hypotyp.*, Frag. 24.3: In 1 Joh.)." This is, for us, a rather surprising report. We are far more used to hearing of Jesus as the wise teacher, critic of hypocrisy and pretense, gently receiving into his embrace children especially.

Imagine the reaction of the crowd if these children, scurrying in their eagerness to greet and hug him, had run straight through his body clasp only themselves. Clement here relates a tradition which he had received concerning John the Beloved Disciple of the Gospel that bears his name, who is said to have leaned on Jesus' breast at the Last Supper. John was also the spiritual father of an enduring community which produced varied literature in his name, divided, among other ways, on the issue of the nature of Jesus' body.

In this story of Clement, John reaches out apparently to lean on Jesus, and his hand passes right into his body. This illustrates two properties which are defining characteristics of what is known as "docetism": Jesus had the appearance of a normal human, but was somehow different in substance. "Docetism" refers to the doctrine found among certain Christian groups that Jesus was a divine being with a non-fleshly, spiritual body; that he merely "appeared" to be human. The word itself derives from the Greek verb *δοκέω*, which means among other things "to seem to be" or "to appear to be." Thus, Jesus "seemed to be" a normal human, but in their view was something else. Related to this is an adverbial use which may be translated as "in appearance only." It is this form which is used by Ignatius at the beginning of the second century to describe Christians of docetic bent who thought that Jesus existed and suffered on the cross "in appearance only." He writes to the church at Smyrna (*Smyr.* 2): "He truly suffered ..., not as some unbelievers say that he suffered in appearance only." Nouns formed from this root could be used of the "appearance" of dreams or visions. So Euripides speaks of "ghosts [*δοκήματα*; lit. "appearances"] that walk in the visions of the night" (*HF* 111). Another noun formed from this root (*δόκησι*) could be used to mean "appearance as opposed to reality" or "phantom."

## 2. The Docetic Helen of Troy

Euripides again uses this word in his play, the *Helen*, a play about Helen of Troy. The Trojan war was by far the most famous political event in antiquity, far larger-than-life as celebrated in scores of myths, stories and dramas, the most important of which was Homer's *Iliad*. The events which led to the war, according to the bards, began with the Judgment of Paris, son of the king of Troy, who was asked by Zeus to pick the most beautiful among the goddesses. Paris chose Aphrodite, and earned for himself as reward not only Helen, but also the unrelenting ire of Aphrodite's scorned competitors, Hera and Athena. In the Homeric version of the story, Paris, with the help of Aphrodite, seduces Helen and persuades her to leave her husband and flee to Troy as his wife. So began the Trojan war, as a nationwide Greek expedition to punish Paris and the Trojans and to recover Helen for her rightful husband, Menelaos.

This version of the story, like the founding of the Church of England, had as its motivating event an embarrassing adultery. Helen was, after all, a daughter of Zeus, gorgeous, wise, and an accomplished healer; she was a goddess in her own right, worshipped in hero cult all over Greece in historical times. Thus the story of her adultery was difficult for some to accept, and an alternative story was created. In Euripides' drama, we find Helen not in Troy during the Trojan war but in Egypt. Action on stage begins with Helen describing the Judgment of Paris and how she came to be in Egypt. Paris has just chosen Aphrodite, who promised him Helen herself. She continues (Euripides, *Helen* 31-48):

But Hera, angry that she was not given the prize,  
made void the love that might have been for Paris and me  
and gave him not me, but in my likeness fashioned

a breathing image out of the sky's air, <and> bestowed  
this on King Priam's son [= Paris], who thinks he holds me  
now

but holds a vain phantom [κενὴν δόκησιν] which is not I. ...

...

I myself was caught up by Hermes, sheathed away  
in films of air, for Zeus had not forgotten me,  
and was set down by him where you see me, in the house  
of Proteus, chosen because, most temperate of men,  
he could guard my honor safe for Menelaus.

The alternate version is that Hera made a substitute for Helen in her exact likeness, a breathing image made of air, which Paris took for the real person. This δόκησις, the "phantom", looked and apparently felt exactly like Helen; Paris evens marries it. The motivation for telling such a story about Helen, for the creation of this body-double, is to save her reputation from the calumny of fleshly lust and impurity.

### **The Docetic Hera for Ixion**

A similar, even older story stands behind this Helen-made-of-Air. Ixion, one of the first humans, we are told, was purified by Zeus for the first murder of one of his kin, in a Greek version of the Cain and Able story. While at the Olympian's home, Ixion conceived a passion for Hera and made an attempt on her chastity. Zeus, to whom she complained, created a false Hera, a double from clouds, with which Ixion lay and begot the progenitor of the Centaurs. For this crime he was bound to a wheel of fire which forever revolves through the heavens (Pindar, *Pyth.* 2.21-48). So the gods were able, in the common poetic tradition centuries older than Christianity, to make "seeming" bodies of heavenly substance, body-doubles for the purpose of avoiding the humiliations and defilements of the flesh.

## Stories of the Docetic Jesus

Among certain Christians of the second and third centuries similar stories were told, with proper adjustments in plot, about Jesus. For example, in the apocryphal *Acts of John* from the end of the second century, we find the following remarkable scene at the crucifixion, quite reminiscent of Paris' Helen and Ixion's Hera. We read that John, as did all the disciples, fled at the crucifixion of Jesus. Apart from the others, however, he escaped to a cave on the Mount of Olives in order to watch the events from a distance. There in the cave, while the crucifixion is in progress below, Jesus appears and tells John that he is not the man who is being crucified (99), but a spiritual Jesus, the Logos of God discarding the man (101). The soldiers have humiliated and crucified a body-double. This one, the real Jesus, suffered none of the things said of him (101). For our part as disciples, John tells us, we are to worship him who was made man apart from the body (103); "It is not a man that I exhort you to worship, but God unchangeable..." (104). Here in the *Acts of John* we see a pattern similar to the Greek poetic models: the body-double suffers the humiliation of the flesh, while the real Jesus escapes, free of suffering and stain.

A similar double Jesus is found elsewhere in docetic Christian texts. For example, in the third century *Apocalypse of Peter* from the Nag Hammadi library, Jesus and Peter approach the scene of the crucifixion together, arm in arm. There Peter sees one Jesus seized and crucified, while another Jesus yet stands next to him. Peter cries out (*Apoc. Peter* 81.7-24):

What do I see, O Lord? Is it you yourself whom they take,  
and yet you are grasping me? Or who is this one, glad and  
laughing on the tree? And is it another one whose feet and  
hands they are striking?

The Savior said to [Peter], "He whom you saw on the tree, glad and laughing, this is the Living Jesus. But this one into whose hands they drive the nails is his fleshly part, which is the substitute being put to shame, the one who came into being in his likeness."

We see in the *Apocalypse of Peter* the same disposable yet perfectly deceptive body-double which undergoes the humiliation of the sinful crowds.

These two examples illustrate one of the common strategies of relieving Jesus of the humiliation of the crucifixion: providing a substitute who is merely human and undergoes what the spiritual Jesus, given the theological presuppositions of the various writers, cannot be allowed to undergo. A different strategy for avoiding the crucifixion is employed by others in the second and third century: Basilides has Simon of Cyrene, who had carried Jesus' cross, be crucified in his place after being transformed into his likeness; others, the western Valentinians, taught that the spiritual Christ had descended on the mere man Jesus in the form of a dove at his baptism, and then departed from him at the crucifixion.

Interpreters have treated these stories, in their fictive and mythic guise, as motivated by Gnostic and dualistic disdain for earthly flesh. Second century Gnostic groups, as nearly all philosophically minded ancients, clearly did disdain the flesh. With their emphasis on the heavenly origin of Jesus and their antipathy for the material world, docetic views appealed to them especially. So docetism, because of its common occurrence in these circles, has been seen as an essentially gnostic, radically dualistic, and peripheral viewpoint, arising relatively late in Christian thought, not to be taken seriously as a contributor to the rise of earliest Christianity. Yet scholars have also noted certain intriguing instances of anti-docetic polemic in the



later first and early second century, at a time when the great gnostic systems had not yet developed and the founders of the great gnostic schools had not as yet been born. These instances seem, to me at least, to give the doctrine a far more respectable pedigree. They are found in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, once Paul's home church and center of the gentile Christian mission, and in the Letters and Gospel of John. This early evidence points to a genesis of docetism outside the great gnostic schools, and perhaps outside of gnosticism altogether. It is with these earlier notices that I am most concerned, and especially with the rise of docetism in the community of John.

One of the aspects of docetism most visible to us in the Johannine tradition is that the body of the earthly Jesus was made of something other than normal human flesh. In another passage from the *Acts of John*, we read of the recent female convert Drusiana reporting on an appearance of Jesus to her while she had been imprisoned in a tomb for refusing to relinquish her new vow of chastity. She tells John and her amazed audience of fellow believers: "The Lord appeared to me in the tomb in the form of John and in that of a young man" (*AJn* 87). All are perplexed; the apostle in turn attempts to explain this remarkable phenomenon from his own experiences with Jesus. He tells them that when Jesus first called him and his brother James to discipleship, James saw Jesus as a child, while John saw him as a fully grown man. Later, as they came to shore and began to follow Jesus, he seemed to John to be a bald-headed man with a full beard, but to James to be a young man with the mere start of a beard. Sometimes he was small and without good looks, and at other times the opposite. And, he tells us, when he reclined on Jesus' breast, "sometimes his breast was smooth and soft, and sometimes hard like a rock" (*AJn* 89). Later in the account we find a description similar to that related by Clement. John tells us that (93):

Sometimes when I meant to touch him I encountered a material, solid body; but at other times again when I felt him, his substance was immaterial and incorporeal, as if it did not exist at all. ... And I often wished, as I walked with him, to see his footprint in the earth, whether it appeared - for I saw him raising himself above the earth - and I never saw it.

Jesus, the unchangeable God, is polymorphic, of many forms, able to appear young or old, as whomever and however he wishes. The substance of his body is something other than human flesh: it is soft or rock hard, material or seemingly immaterial.

If we go back in time from the end of the second century to its beginning, we find Ignatius of Antioch opposing those whose doctrine is related, though not identical, to that in the *Acts of John*. He writes (*Smyr.* 2): "Just as they think, so it will also happen to them, that they will become bodiless and *daimon*-like." This passage is written not long after the Gospel of John, in a not-too-distant geographical location and within a roughly similar cultural context. Here we find the other major strategy of docetism used to deal with the humiliation of the crucifixion: not only did Jesus only appear to be human, he also only appeared to suffer on the cross. So common was this viewpoint on the character of the body of Jesus in the East that nearly six hundred years after the crucifixion, such Christians influenced Mohammed: we find this type of docetic Jesus as late as the seventh century in the Qur'an. Mohammed threatens orthodox Christians (4.156):

✓ For their saying: We have killed the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the messenger of Allah, and they killed him not, nor did they cause his death on the cross, but he was made to appear to them as such.

There is no mention of a body-double in either passage. In the time of Ignatius, this expedient had not quite yet arisen. The reason for its invention was as a counter to the very type of polemic supporting the fleshly crucifixion which we find in Ignatius and especially in the Gospel of John. These writers insisted on a fleshly crucifixion; some docetic Christians, in reaction to them, provided for one with a body-double, still preserving the spiritual nature of the "real" Jesus. Yet the more common docetic claim was that made by the opponents of Ignatius, whose like-minded communities eventually influenced Mohammed, that Jesus merely seemed to suffer.

According to Ignatius, these Christians believed that Jesus was "bodiless and *daimon*-like." These two terms must be taken together to make sense: Jesus is not bodiless entirely; instead he has a body like a *daimon*. The word *daimon* in this usage is the general descriptive term for spiritual being, and was used for any and all of the gods; even Zeus was a *daimon*. In other words, according to these Christians, Jesus had a body not like ours, but like one of the gods. Recall the *Acts of John*: Jesus was god, with a body quite different from ours.

If we move to the canonical Johannine literature, to the Letters and Gospel of John, we find a similar complex of ideas. Here again are Christians who do not believe that Jesus had a normal human body. 2 John 7 is polemical testimony against "those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in flesh." We read in 1 John 4:2-3:

2 ... every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, 3 and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.

More importantly, we learn that these Christians were early within the very community, that they were originally Johannine Christians who worshipped along with their brothers and sisters, and only at some later time departed because of their doctrinal disagreements. So we read in 1 John 2:19:

They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us.

So there was a division in the community of the Beloved disciple: some affirmed the Jesus of the flesh, as in the Gospel and Letters of John; others, as in the *Acts of John*, denied the flesh and saw Jesus as a heavenly being with a body like the gods.

### **Two Basic Christologies**

Broadly speaking, we may say that early Christians looked at Jesus somewhere along a continuum between two opposing viewpoints, Low and High Christology as they are called. The first, Low Christology, held that Jesus was at base a human being, born of human parents, who because of his wisdom, righteousness, and/or obedience, was appointed by God to be the Messiah, or was in the providence of God predestined and appointed to such a position. Such a view was common among the so-called Jewish Christian sects in the East, and lay at the base of Adoptionist Christology. The opposite view, High Christology, was that Jesus was in reality a god, a divine being who descended to earth from heaven and took on some form of humanity and then reascended to where he had first belonged. This view was especially common among Gnostic groups, and lies at the base of the Christology of the Gospel of John. Later orthodoxy made a valiant effort at melding these two views, developing in the fifth century the doctrine of the Hypostatic

Union, the teaching that Jesus was both God and Man in whom these two complete natures were present in one person.

No such doctrine existed in the first century. The terminology had not yet been invented or refined. The phrase "hypostatic union" would not have been understood at all; it was not a possible combination of semantic fields in the first century. In addition, there was not yet the need for such a doctrine; the questions which motivated its development had not yet been asked. People were not concerned how the two natures of Christ, divine and human, were related and interacted; he was not viewed in those terms. \*

The ancient world had prepared the first century Christians for three basic classes of greater-than-normal beings: pure gods who occasionally took human form and descended to earth; pure humans, usually rulers or the wise, who were specially related to the gods' care and blessing; and a third class of beings who had mixed parentage, divine and human: the heroes. The heroes were simply examples of mingled races, with strengths of the gods and weaknesses of humans, as any child of different races might mix the characteristics of each parent. So the children of the gods were not "hypostatically united", but of a single, hybrid nature. By poetic convention, however, the heroes took a stock set of characteristics from each parent: they were stronger, wiser, and better looking than normal humans, reflecting their divine ancestry, yet were also subject to suffering and death, inherited from their mortal parent. The idea that the one person Jesus could have two *complete and separate* natures boggled the mind and exceeded the conceptual framework available. Indicative of this lack of interpretive model is one of the early attempts to deal with this issue, referred to above: Jesus and Christ were two completely separate beings; the divine person Christ descended in the form of a dove and rested upon the mere man Jesus at his baptism, and then abandoned Jesus just

before the crucifixion. So it was, according to this view, that while on the cross, the man Jesus cried out to the divine Christ, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

## Two Basic Theologies

In addition and again speaking broadly, the ancient world offered two major theological viewpoints, monistic and dualistic. Both were far older than Christianity, and both were quite well attested in the first Christian century. The most venerable was the monistic theology of the traditional Olympian gods, which included the cults of the lesser gods and nature spirits, the heroes, and the dead. These were the gods of Homer and epic who were celebrated on stage and in songs at parties and pubs. These were the gods of daily cult, of street corner shrines and home altars. They were by far the most commonly worshipped right through the Christian period. In fact their cult never ceased, even after the Christianization of the Empire; it was merely baptized as the cult of martyrs and saints, of Mary and the Holy Family. The cult of the dead, for its part, continued in the Christian world without any change at all. These gods lived close to the earth: on Olympus, in the rivers and streams and groves, under the earth, or in the tombs and shrines of the heroes and the dead. They were also in human form. In fact, this worked the other way around: they did not look like us; we looked like them. Humans had been formed on the model of the gods; we were made in the gods' image. They, however, had bodies made of heavenly materials: we of clay, earth and water.

The second major theology was based in Indo-European dualism, which began to infiltrate into Greece at least by the seventh century BCE, especially through the religious tradition known as Orphism. This theology attracted the great philosophers and their ideas of Greek philosophical monotheism. It taught that there was but one

inclusive god, made of pure spirit, or light, or fire, whose proper dwelling was immeasurably distant from earth, beyond the seven spheres of the planets and fixed stars. This god did not look like anything on earth, but was in fact invisible and non-earthly, radically divided from the material cosmos.

In this theology humans were also dual in nature, composed of an outward body of earthly flesh and an inner, real person of the soul. The body was merely an envelope or a garment worn by the soul, to be discarded at death. In Paul's words, we are "a treasure hidden in an earthen vessel (2 Cor 4:7)." Dualism put a rather negative valuation on the body and flesh. So the Orphics described it in one of antiquity's most famous sayings: σῶμα σῆμα, "the body is a tomb." One also finds in Philo, a Hellenistic Jew and contemporary of Jesus and Paul, a strong emphasis on the superiority of soul to body. For him, the body hinders and obstructs (κωλυσιεργεῖ) the soul (*Leg. All.* 1.103); it enslaves and brings the soul into manifold evils.

This negative view of the body had wide currency, in addition, among the early Christians. Paul employed it as the basis for his own anthropology. He tells us in Romans, "I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is in my flesh" (Rom 7:18). The two realms, fleshly and spiritual, are, as it were, at war: "The flesh lusts against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh, for these are in opposition to one another" (Gal 5:17). This same view of the body of flesh is found inside the Gospel of John. To Nicodemus, Jesus declares the fundamental opposition, that "What is born of the flesh is flesh, ✧ and what is born of the Spirit is spirit" (3:6). ✧ And at the close of the remarkable passage on Jesus as the Bread from Heaven, Jesus tells his disciples, "It is the spirit which gives life; the flesh is useless" (6:63).

The soul, on the other hand, was composed of the same element, of light or fire or spirit, as was the one god itself. Philo, again, tells us that the soul derives from the divine world and is an alien resident in the body. So he writes (*Quaest. in Gen.* 3.10):

For the soul of the wise man, when it comes from above from the ether and enters into a mortal ... is truly a sojourner in a land not its own, for the earthly nature of the body is alien to the pure mind and subjects it to slavery and brings upon it all kinds of suffering ... .

So the soul, like god, was also a foreign entity in its micro-cosmos, the body.

### Monism and Dualism: Contributions to Docetism

- ✓ If we examine these two broad categories, traditional Olympian monism and Greek philosophical dualism, for their contributions to early Christian views of Jesus and especially to the problem of how we might understand the rise of docetism, we make some surprising discoveries, not at all in accord with our presuppositions. The dualistic view provides the Greco-Roman world with a model of the wise teacher and guide, the representative of divine wisdom. Here is the divine soul, or divinely inspired soul, within a humble and normal human body, as for example Socrates or Zeno. In fact the lowly nature of the human appearance and circumstance emphasized the divine nature of the wisdom within. Proper response by those who heard such wisdom was to direct themselves to wise living according to divine laws and the example of their teacher, to orient their lives to eternal values and to the worship, not of the teacher, but of the unseen, immaterial, and eternal god. Often, especially in Greece, dualistic ideas held that the nature of the disciples was the same as that of their teacher, and that they were



only to awaken to eternal values and their own commonality with the divine world. In view of our investigation, dualism does not at all necessitate a high Christology, nor lead to docetism. It may even accommodate a quite low Christology, that Jesus was merely an inspired teacher, not essentially different from his listeners. Dualism, and therefore gnosticism, does not of itself provide for a docetic body.

The monistic view, on the other hand, affords remarkable evidence for the kind of Jesus we have seen in the *Acts of John*. In the monistic world of the Olympians, the gods are of human appearance, but are made of different, heavenly substance. In ancient world chemistry there were but four elements: earth, water, air, and fire. Sometimes a fifth element, the quintessence, was added: ether, the rarefied atmosphere of heaven itself. "Spirit" was by the very meaning of the word "air"; *spiritus* in Latin means "breeze" or "breath." "Spirit," used in the spiritual sense, was thought to be made of air or fire or ether, or a combination of these elements. Humans are made of the terrestrial heavy elements, water and earth; gods are made of the lighter heavenly elements, air, fire and ether. Their bodies are therefore by definition spiritual and docetic: they are made of spirit, but appear to be human.

Such ideas were of ancient pedigree and deeply imbedded in the culture. In Homer, for example, we find that the bodies of the gods were constituted of different material from ours. In *Iliad* 5, Diomedes tears the skin of Aphrodite's hand with his spear (5.339-342),

... and blood flowed from the goddess,  
ichor, that which runs in the veins of the blessed divinities;  
since they eat no food, nor do they drink of the shining

wine, and therefore they have no blood and are called immortal.

Even as thoroughgoing a dualist as the apostle Paul accepts this fundamental datum, and informs us of the differing types of flesh of heavenly and earthly beings. He writes (1 Cor 15:39-47):

39 Not all flesh is alike ... . 40 There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies. ... 44 ... If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. ... 47 The first man [Adam] was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man [Jesus] is from heaven.

The normal human being was constituted of earthly and human flesh. But "not all flesh is alike"; beings of heaven, and especially Jesus, the Man from Heaven, were constituted of a different substance, a spiritual body.

In addition, the gods were able to appear and disappear at will, to take the form of whomever they wished, and to accomplish any number of miraculous acts, as we saw in the *Acts of John*. So Zeus appears to Leda as a swan, to Europa as a bull, to Alcmena in the form of her husband Amphitryon, and to many others in other forms; Poseidon likens himself to the prophet Kalchas, and immediately thereafter flies away as a hawk (*Il.* 13.45, 62); Dionysus appears to Pentheus as a bull (*Bacchae* 920ff.); Athena impersonates several characters in Homer, and so on. The gods cause and cure diseases, not only walk on but ride chariots on water, cast mountains about and at each other, fly, appear and disappear, transform themselves and others into animals, trees, stones, and the reverse; in short, they do anything they wish. Thus the early Church inherited a long history of myths about the gods, gods who looked human but were made of different and spiritual material,

who appeared from heaven on earth, and were able, and by poetic convention were expected, to perform miracles.

Here is the base from which sprang the docetic view of Jesus the miracle worker, the son of god as son of Zeus. Justin Martyr in the middle of the second century uses this concept in his defense of the Christian faith to emperor Antoninus Pius. He writes (*1 Apol.* 21):

In saying that the Logos, who is the first offspring of God, was born for us without sexual union, as Jesus Christ our teacher, and that he was crucified and died, and after rising again ascended into heaven, we introduce nothing new beyond those whom you call sons of Zeus. You know how many sons of Zeus the writers whom you honor speak of - Hermes, the hermeneutic Word and teacher of all; Asclepius, who was also a healer and after being struck by lightening ascended to heaven - as did Dionysus who was torn in pieces ... .

So the stories of the children of the gods were useful paradigms for the early Church in its understanding of the person of Jesus. He is called the Son of God more than ten times in the Gospel of John. In the still Greco-Roman context of the mid-first century, this would have been heard by many differently from our post-Creedal conceptions: Jesus was seen as one of the sons of Zeus, one of the gods who did not have human flesh, who could work miracles, and appear in any form he wished.

I ended this quotation in the midst of Justin's longer list with his mention of Dionysus, the most divine and miraculous of all the sons of Zeus conceived of a human mother. The most common Homeric epithet of the gods is "the immortals." Even their food was immortal: they did not eat and drink the food of humans; instead they drank "nectar" (νέκταρ) and ate "ambrosia" (ἀμβροσία).

This food of the gods was able to strengthen and preserve human bodies: it is applied to the dead body of Sarpedon to preserve him for burial (*Il.* 16.670, 680), and given to Achilles to instill in him divine strength (*Il.* 19.347, 353). The concept, the "food of the gods," was applied in Hellenistic Judaism to the Manna from Heaven, the food of the angels given to the generation of the Exodus. There was one other heavenly food which granted eternal life: the flesh and blood of Dionysus himself, son of God, miraculous and polymorphic and docetic like the gods. These two images, the Manna and Dionysus, the eating of which and whom brings immortality, leads us directly to the Gospel of John.

### John 6

John chapter 6 presents the reader with one of the more vexing passages in the literature of first century Christianity. The chapter begins with the miracle of the Feeding of the 5,000: Jesus multiplies a boy's lunch into enough food to feed a large multitude. The discourse turns to the subject of the manna from heaven which Moses had given to the Israelites. This, Jesus claims, is his own function: he is the bread from heaven. He then makes a further shocking claim (6:51-56):

... 51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." ... 53 "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. 54 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day."

Scholars have read these verses in the light of other, less offensive, Eucharistic passages which treat of the body and blood of Jesus

under the metaphors of bread and wine. In such texts, Jesus at the last supper held bread and wine in his hands and invested them with symbolic meaning. For example, we read in 1 Cor 11:23-25:

the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

Similar passages are found in each of the Synoptic Gospels. There is no suggestion of cannibalism, and there is clear presentation of the metaphorical significance of the elements.

We are also told by interpreters that the Johannine passage quoted above is not original to the Gospel, but an interpolation from the hand of a later redactor with an especially strong sacramental interest. It is, we are told, merely a redactor's way of referring to the same symbolic bread and wine which the rest of the Christian community had been using for more than sixty years. Such a view is clearly consonant with the later Church application of these verses to the Eucharist. Yet the Johannine passage is of a wholly different stamp from that of the four Eucharistic texts of the Last Supper found elsewhere in the New Testament. The later Church interpreted them by means of the Johannine passage; in other words, the influence went in the other direction.

If we compare those texts with that in John we find remarkable differences. In the Corinthian passage just quoted, we encounter Jesus on the night before Passover, at his last supper in an inner room with his closest associates. Jesus breaks bread and says, "This is my body"; the breaking of the bread, not its consumption, is the

symbol for the death of Jesus, the breaking of his body, and "breaking bread" became one of the names in the next century for the Eucharist. The cup is called the "new covenant in my blood"; drinking of the wine was the signing of a contract, binding the drinker to a new relationship with God and the community. The entire ritual is said to be a remembrance: "Do this in remembrance of me." No mention is made of eating flesh, or drinking blood, or, significantly, of eternal life for the consumer; there is only wine and bread during a meal, as remembrance of Jesus' death and symbols of the new covenantal relationship of the participants.

In John, however, we find a wholly different situation. There is no Passover, no inner room, no ritual setting, no meal, no loaf of bread being broken for anyone, no cup to drink and no wine at all, no mention of a substitutionary death, no new covenant, and nothing to remember. The setting is outdoors during the day, before a large and mixed multitude of outsiders and disciples, in the midst of a difficult controversy in which Jesus seems to offend purposely as many people as possible. The basic image is not even the same: in the Eucharistic passages it is the impending death of Jesus; in John it is the story of the manna in the wilderness in which no one dies; as the old manna from heaven gave life, so Jesus is the new manna who will give eternal life.

But mixed together with the traditional story of manna is the statement: "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in yourselves" (John 6:53). And then following this, incredibly, Jesus declares: "It is the spirit which gives life; the flesh is useless" (6:63). So we have in the same passage: "Eat the flesh of the Son of Man," and "the flesh is useless." For this apparent direct contradiction alone, one may sympathize with those who excise the passage. But given our investigation, I think it fair to ask a different question: Docetism ascribes to Jesus a flesh

qualitatively different from ours; how did the flesh of Jesus, as distinct from normal flesh, come to be viewed as "bread from heaven" which rendered one immortal?

## Dionysus and John 2

John chapter two gives us an earlier extended passage which, it seems to me, provides a key to the interpretation of chapter six. In this chapter Jesus is at a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the wine gives out; apparently the guests have already drunk deeply. Almost secretly, without fanfare or announcement, he turns 120 gallons of water into wine of excellent vintage; the wine steward compliments its quality. The sheer quantity of wine produced, after the host's own supply has already run out, is significant: it can only have been for the purpose of rendering the guests quite drunk, quite possessed by the spirit of wine. This is said expressly to be Jesus' first miracle, and we must not be so ignorant as to fail to recognize its import: this is the signature miracle of Dionysus. Dionysus was well known in Galilee in the first century; during the ritual year, Dionysus regularly turned water into wine at his temples throughout the Roman world. So Jesus is here accomplishing what no ancient would have missed or misunderstood; he is a new Dionysus.

Dionysus was a divinity in human form who could appear and disappear at will, change his form, and perform miracles of remarkable variety. One talent most interesting is his ability to suffer punishment and imprisonment without suffering at all. Even in the Orphic version of his story, when he has been dismembered and consumed by the Titans, he survives and lives again, not only in Olympia, the Underworld, Phrygia and Thrace, but also in the souls of his followers. One of the central features of the mysteries of Dionysiac religion was the ritual and symbolic consumption of the flesh and blood of the god: the raw flesh of a

young animal was touched to the lips as a reenactment of the eating of the young deity by the Titans. Thus he was celebrated, as one who had survived death and granted immortality, as Lord of Souls. This symbolic act brought union with Dionysus, Dionysus within the celebrant, who granted eternal life. So in the Gospel of John, Jesus says of himself (6:54-56):

54 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life ... . 56 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.

### **Christologies of John**

John's community, uniquely among Christian groups, was able to assimilate many views of Jesus, far the most of any of our Gospels. It is the most inclusive Christology of the early Church. The post-Easter Jesus, once he had begun to carry the projection of the Divine Savior in the hearts of his followers, became identified with any and every vehicle of religious meaning in their experience, both Jewish and pagan. So he was the Logos, the Light of the World, the Only Begotten Son, the Prophet like Moses, the Lamb of God, the Son of Man, the Son of God, Jacob's Ladder, the Good Shepherd, and more. There was little or no constraint. As long as Jesus occupied the spiritual center of his followers, he became identified with whatever could evoke that center. We should not be surprised, then, to find as we do a dozen or more Christologies in John. Among them we observe that some Christians saw Jesus on the model of Dionysus, the Son of God as Son of Zeus, who turns water to wine and whose very flesh and blood brings immortality. And this Christology had as its necessary corollary that the flesh of Jesus be divine flesh, and therefore that Jesus be a docetic being.



## Conclusions

In this view, what became the docetic understanding of Jesus was in origin neither late nor essentially gnostic, but stemmed from the simple piety of new Christians who saw Jesus in the light of their own previous religious experience, in a very exalted light, as one of the gods of Olympian heaven sojourning on earth for the benefit of those who would receive him. As with the gods most familiar to these worshippers, his miracles especially would be emphasized: he would walk on water, multiply the loaves, heal the sick, raise the dead, and especially, turn water to wine and provide immortality to those who would partake of his divine flesh and divine blood. Standing against such a view were those more educated and philosophically minded Johannine Christians who saw Jesus from a dualistic viewpoint: Jesus was, like Plato, a divine soul indwelling a real human body of flesh. Thus he could be the very Logos of God clothed with a real human body. The Logos need perform no miracles, nor could it provide its flesh as the food of immortality, any more than did Socrates. It is this faction which so adamantly maintained that a Jesus of flesh had been crucified.

Here, I submit, is the basis for the division within the Johannine community on the nature of the body of Jesus. It is not the gnostic or dualistic faction which originates the denial of real flesh, but the monistic simple believers in traditional Olympian religion, who in their conversion came to see Jesus through the lens of their daily traditional culture, as a son of Zeus whose flesh was the very body of the gods. And here in this division of opinion, as I find wonderfully intriguing, are the two necessary elements for the second century stories of the body-double Jesus in the *Acts of John* and elsewhere: a Jesus of heavenly essence who escapes suffering, and a Jesus of flesh who is crucified.

By this reading of the evidence, docetism is in origin neither gnostic or radically dualist, nor inspired by a hatred of the flesh, even though its model had clear and ready appeal to gnostic groups who held such views. Both of its main expressions, the Jesus who only appears to be human even through the crucifixion, and the Jesus who is provided with a body-double, arise not out of the myth-making of second century gnosticism, but are based on very ancient and popular precedent: such stories had been told of the gods for centuries. And this is an essential point: these are stories of the gods. Docetism, whatever else it may be, was fundamentally a high Christology, in fact the highest of all Christologies to arise in the first century: Jesus was god in bodily form, to be worshipped and assimilated in ritual, who indwelt and immortalized his followers. Docetism was high praise indeed.

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